

## Speech by Elsie Bell Grosvenor, November 19, 1936

Memories of My Father — a Talk Given at the 25th Anniversary meeting and banquet of The Society of Telephone Pioneers Nov 19, 1936. Address by MRS. GILBERT GROSVENOR AT THE 25th ANNIVERSARY MEETING AND BANQUET OF THE "SOCIETY OF TELEPHONE PIONEERS" (THE ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL CHAPTER OF WASHINGTON, D.C.) at the Lee House Hotel, November 19, 1936 MR. MARTIN (J.O. Martin, Editor of The Transmitter of The Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Companies), LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

I appreciate greatly the honor of being asked to speak a few words at the 25th Anniversary Meeting and Banquet of the Society of Telephone Pioneers.

I was very much intrigued with Mr. Martin's account of his visit to my father in Washington, and I agree with him that it was a privilege as well as being interesting and amusing to be one of the children of Alexander Graham Bell.

As Mr. Martin intimated, one of my father's outstanding characteristics was his love of young people. He was a born teacher, and never until the day of his death was he happier than when he was trying to draw out young people and get them to think for themselves. Everything he said and did was so intensely vital and dramatic that I have heard people say that no matter what he talked about they could not help being interested.

As children my sister and I thought of our father as a very lovable companion, who was always doing strange things, such as sitting up all night working, and who had a bad habit of asking very difficult questions which required much thought to answer.

I remember for instance, one day, when I had just commenced to study geography in school, my teacher told me that the world was round like an orange. One of the ways in which we know that to be true, she said, was because of the round shadow cast on the

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moon during eclipses, and because people had actually sailed around the world. This explanation satisfied me completely. That night at dinner I began telling my father what I had learned at school. I remember my father taking an orange in his hand, and saying, "Elsie, do you mean to tell me that the world is round like this orange? What happens to people on the under-side? Do you mean to say that those people are standing on their heads and hanging on by their toes? How could people possibly stick on the underside of the world? Why wouldn't they fall off?" I tried to give him the regulation answers, which the teacher had given me, but my father would not be satisfied. Finally I got tired of his questioning and said, "Oh, God wills it that way!" So, you see, my learned, scientific father did not always get the responses that he expected from his own children.

We always spent the summers at Baddeck on Cape Breton Island, where we still go. Very often we would go out on the beach with my father and he would demonstrate to us the position of the solar system with regard to space. He used to take a great big stone, put it on the ground to represent the sun, and then we would space off the proportionate distance of the planets from that sun and place smaller stones of varying sizes, from a very small one for the little planet Mercury up to a large one of the giant planet Jupiter. When we got to the very end, and asked where to place the fixed stars, my father explained that the nearest fixed star would be so far away as to be out of sight from where we stood. I have never forgotten that demonstration of the distance between the fixed stars and the planets nor their relative sizes as marked out by stones on the shores of the Bras D'Or Lakes.

We never sat down to a family meal together but some experiment was tried or somebody was sent to look something up in the dictionary or encyclopedia, or that my father did not pull out his little black notebook and tell us some amusing story of something he had read in the daily paper. In fact, there never was a dull moment when my father was around.

I remember one summer years later, after Mr. Grosvenor and I were married, we had two distinguished visitors who came to spend a few days with my father, who was then in the

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midst of his kite experiments and his studies into the possibility of aerial flight. One of the visitors was Professor Langley, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, who was working on the problems of flight from another angle, and the other visitor was Professor Simon Newcomb, the distinguished astronomer and mathematician, who had just published an article in one of the magazines in which he had proved to his own satisfaction that flying was a mathematical impossibility.

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My father had arranged to have these two gentlemen visit him at different times, because they did not get along very well. But, as luck would have it, their visits overlapped, and my father found himself in the position of peacemaker. One day they had a great argument about the laws of gravitation, and while they were having it hot and heavy, Professor Langley made some mention of the fact that a cat always falls on its feet when dropped from a height, no matter from what position the cat started to fall. Professor Newcomb immediately said that that was not so. It all depended on the way the cat was held and that it could not land on its feet if it started from an upside-down position. It was mathematically impossible, he said. "Here's a good chance for an experiment. Let's try it," said my father, and immediately the experiment was arranged for.

We all adjourned from the diningroom to the veranda, where there is a ten-foot drop to the ground. My father was afraid the kitten might get hurt, so we all scurried around and got a mattress and pillows which we placed on the ground to break its fall. The cat was presented to Professor Newcomb. He held it by its four legs, upside-down over the side of the balcony railing, the kitten squalling and squirming in discomfort. While Professor Langley and my father looked on with stop watches in their hands and the children and guests stood in a circle around the mattress watching, the kitten was dropped and — it landed on its feet, Professor Newcomb insisted on trying the experiment over and over again before he became convinced that a cat will always land on its feet. But this only led to another dispute — why did the cat always land on its feet?

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Elsie May Bell Grosvenor November 19, 1936 Washington, DC.